The Wings of Song

811.5
H572w

HAROLD HERSEY

UNIVERSITY
OF FLORIDA
LIBRARIES

For Algernon St. John-Brenon
with many thanks for his
pleasing article about me and
the pleasure of reading his
"columns" in the Telegraph.

Harold Hersey

Library of Congress
Washington, D.C.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR:

Poems

Canzona Amorosa

Silhouettes of the City (in preparation)

The Wings of Song

BY

HAROLD HERSEY

Washington:
THE LIBRARY PRESS
1915

(Copyright, 1915, by Harold Hersey)

To

The dearest of all friends,

My Mother.

CONTENTS

Noémi 9
Life 10
After the Funeral 11
Old Fritz Reuter's 12
Memories 13
The Half-Gods 17
You Called 18
The Dreamers 19
Pharais 20
Mexico 21
Maerie 22
Where Silent Shadows Pass 23
To G— 24
Our Loves 24
The Vase 25
Two Old Women 26
The Switchman 27
Five Hours Later 28
To My Father 29
The Poet 29
Pierrot 30
A Nocturne 31
The Dawn of Life 35
The Dead Book 37

NOĚMI

Though my heart sings,
Perhaps all the gifts I've given to you
Are but flowers dead ere they were plucked
From the hidden gardens of heaven.

Your warm lips tremble with love's soft voice,
Your heart throbs from what I've conquered and with
what you have yet to give.
All I possess lies glittering, waiting you,
A poverty-stricken heap of baubles—
But what you have given me turns the winter of my
heart to spring
And stirs the old embers to new flames.

I am unworthy of it all:
Of the stars you hold forward in your soft hands,
Of the rising sun in your eyes;
I can but gather up my feeble things
And fling them breathlessly before your feet!

LIFE

One horde that struggle through the dusk,
  Ill-dressed and dripping with their sweat,
With forms that hold the heart's worn husk,
  Bowed down from worry and from debt.

One horde that laugh and loiter here,
  Who drink and clothe their bodies well,
Who sing away the whole rich year
  And haunt the twisted streets of Hell.

A few that work and watch and pray,
  Who dream new worlds from out the strife,
A few that will not turn away,
  But linger heart and hand with life.

AFTER THE FUNERAL

There by the window was his chair,
  His absence seemed to fill the room,
The odor of flowers scented the air
  With their withered bloom.

On a peg in the closet hung his clothes,
  In a corner stood his ugly crutch,
The family Bible pressed a rose
  She dared not touch.

And as the twilight hour nears
  She does not bring in the table light,
But sits and dreams of the coming years
  Alone at night.

The glow of evening flutters dim,
  The gold bars over the doorsill creep,
And weary with the loss of him,
  She drops asleep!

OLD FRITZ REUTER'S

Haunted house of wondrous memory,
  Empty now for all hereafter!
Many a night have I spent with thee
  'Mid friends and wine and laughter.

Cheerless the place I love so well,
  Cheerless and still and cold,
Barren the rooms whose silences tell
  Of voices and memories old.

Gloomily I tread the vacant floor,
  Sad and weary at heart,
Wondering whether at night by the door
  The old friends meet and part.

Do they come when shadowy evening falls,
  And order wine or beer?
Do their voices echo along these halls
  When the midnight hour is near?

Where are they gone? Old Building, speak!
  You seem to hang your head,
And I hear a broken shutter creak—
  The strange voice of the dead.

MEMORIES

I.

On my canvas of life Love shadowed your face,
  But Fate, unhindered, blotted it out;
I've memories there, the frame and the space,
  The hangings of velvet, the hours of doubt.

A chamber I've chosen far down in my heart,
  That frame, empty now, on an easel I've set,
And there undisturbed I have placed it apart
  With its odor of lilies and mignonette.

II.

A many a day has gone, my Love,
  Since you and I were lovers;
But in my heart that song, my Love,
  A lonely echo hovers.

And many a morn shall dawn, my Love,
  Ere you and I shall meet;
Though I'll remember long, my Love,
  That victory is defeat.

III.

Some haunting dream of a wan desire
Illumines my soul with its holy fire;
Our Love arises from the tomb
To mock me in this endless gloom.
"The dreamer's a child," I heard you say,
"And the dreamer of dreams must always pay."
Slender hands that I might have kissed
Hover and tremble in the mist
That gathers in clouds before my eyes.
"But Time, too late, shall make ye wise."
The voice of our sorrow dims and is gone
And I am alone with a dying song.

IV.

And when I laid my fragrant lilies in your hand,
Did that warm heart of yours completely understand?

V.

In one short solemn hour you were more
  Than life to me,
The music of your laughter set my heart's
  Despondence free;

Your soft displeasure was my winter,
  Your smile my spring,
And from your love life turned into a deep
  And solemn thing.

Within your eyes the lights of summer turned
  To autumn's glow,
Your heart was like a garden where most wondrous
  Fancies grow.

VI.

Ah, Love, what would I not have given to
Swept back the shadows gathering in you?
The Hours wept when I knelt at your shrine,
And if your heart suffered then, Love, think on mine.

VII.

I often hear of you and wonder how
  The presence that diffused itself through mine,
How that warm spirit thrilled with love fares now,
  What dull things passing near it turn divine.

I was as moulten metal poured out through
  Your hands and shaped to something finer than
Myself when you were close. Ah, Love, in you
  The sweetest dreams of all my life began.

You seem as some resplendent light that glows
  Far off within another world, while I
Stand in life's pathway with a single rose
  Plucked from your heart, that droops but cannot die.

VIII.

Somewhere along the sides of life's broad highway did
we part,
I with an echo of your love still ringing in my heart;
God only knows the reason why, I do not understand,
I only know that you were white as the lilies in your
hand.

IX.

You are the moon within my heart's far sky,
And all the others, stars that linger near;
The night wind is your voice, its echo I,
The breath of summer through my wintry year.

X.

And ever you, and ever the hours,
Ever the garden of lovely flowers,
The ivied walls and sea without,
Immortal silence, endless doubt.

THE HALF-GODS

Where are the gods who ruled the earth
  Ere the fruit of enlightenment ripened and fell?
Where are the women who gave them birth?
  Where are the gods? ah, who can tell?

Where are the Thors and Vulcan's now?
  Only the half-gods rule today,
Only makers of words and crowns for the brow
  Which the half-gods scatter and give away.

Now where are the men who longed for the sound
  Of a close-fought battle and the king's reward
Of knighthood there on the bloody ground?
  Where is the hand that loved the sword?

Where is the rogue that faced the crowd
  With a smile on his lips and death in his heart,
And who changed his armor into a shroud
  For a harlot's love and a brave man's part?

Have the gods who ruled gone forth from the earth?
  Have the swords they worshipped turned to rust?
Alas! the mouths that quivered in mirth
  Lie under the roadway choked with dust.

The real gods dwell in the books alone,
  Forgotten by men when they turn from school,
To-day none die for a monarch's throne;
  We reason it out—the half-gods rule!

YOU CALLED

You called!
My weary heart responded to your cry,
  My hands found yours through mists and deep'ning dark,
My lips still trembling with an errent sigh
  Cling to your neck and left their reddened mark.

You called!
I left the new-born kiss within its nest,
  A rose to blossom and to fade, and ere
It turned to whiteness of your lilied breast
  I tangled up more kisses in your hair.

You called!
Each star pressed close upon us in the night,
  You drew me near ('tis sweet, a woman's way)
The sadness of my soul takes instant flight;
  You called, and I shall willingly obey.

THE DREAMERS

To dream of dear days now forever gone
  Along the channel of the years,
And pour into a melody of song
  The heart sufferings and our tears;

To carve an altar out of memories
  Where souls like candles fringe the shrine
And worshippers come on their bended knees
  To murmur prayers poured forth like wine;

To dream that mortal dust is more than dust,
  That human happiness is true,
That all our endless suffering is just
  A threnody each man lives through;

This is the privilege that Romance gives
  To moths that know the touch of fire,
To him that drops his worldly tools and lives
  But in the silence of desire.

PHARAIS

Nay, I am not the voice that whispers in thy heart,
Not she whom thou seekest,
Only the breath of memory that blows through thee
like a mad wind.

I have seen the weaving of a dream in thine eyes
When thou hast seemed most wild with desire,
A dream not of me but another.

I, too, have loved, and loving know that our's is only
a shadow,
Only a rose plucked too early from the stem.
I know and forgive thee, child.

Many a star shines unseen,
But never a love went begging for a mistress—
Go on thy way to her.

MEXICO

Like some unhappy wanton do you fling
  Your insults in our faces with a sneer
That on your rougèd lips hangs quivering
  When even dark destruction loiters near.

Too long distrustful, daring every fate,
  Unhindered and disgruntled through the past,
With eyes whose silence mirror forth a hate
  Unending and defiant to the last.

Your palms are stained with blood of murdered men
  Who kissed your swollen lips and laughted at death,
Who drank disease in some deserted fen
  And lulled their passions in your evil breath.

Centuries of lovers bowed above
  Your hand and lost their souls within your smile;
Hot-blooded creatures knowing nought but love,
  Nor knowing that but just a little while.

And as you age, the lovers now desert
  You in the shadows, for your beauty's flown;
On through the world you drag your spattered skirt
  And stand within the shadows all alone.

Bravado clings about your laughter yet,
  And feeds the sneer that wrinkles up your lips—
You'll stand defiant till your sun has set
  With head thrown back and hands upon your hips.

MAERIE

Our love was like a violin
  Under a high-strung bow,
And whether joy lurked more therein
  Than sorrow I do not know.

Though laughter sparkled in her heart,
  Grief came with the other things,
For it's hard to keep the twain apart
  On the violin's musical strings.

The bow of my affection stirred
  Each little throbbing wire,
And the sweetest music I've ever heard
  Was that of her desire.

WHERE SILENT SHADOWS PASS

A week of springtime days and idle ease
  Along the country roads and o'er the grass,
By shrines of nature hid among the trees,
  Lone places where the silent shadows pass;

To dream at night beneath a mystic sky
  Of stars, those footprints of the unknown feet;
To hear the quiet breezes softly sigh
  Beyond the utmost fringe of any street;

To hear His heart beat when the coming night
  Fast gathers up the sounds and shreds of day;
To watch and wonder at this lordly night—
  Ah, this were life—when even I might pray.

TO G—

Perhaps if we had loved
The world would have been fairer and desire more
sweet;
I would have kissed your lips and drawn therefrom
The fire that every dreamer sips
When love is won.

I should have dreamed anear you,
Kissed over-red your graceful limbs,
Lay by you in the night and drawn
Love from your half-closed eyes—

Who knows what might have been
Had we two loved?

OUR LOVES

It is strange how our passionate loves have perished
And dreams turned to dust that the heart should have
cherished;
How the clasp of a hand that once thrilled us with fire
Now stirs us to pity but not with desire.

THE VASE

I was a temple builder, rearing high
A structure in the silence of the sky

Wherein were things of transcendental mold,
With idols dumb, of heavily burnished gold.

And when the finishing of the temple neared
I chose one solitary room veneered

With whitest ivory, where I could place
In glittering rows each finished, dream-carved vase.

In every vase I locked a poem tight
Within a casket jewelled as the night

With starry gems incrusted in the wood
And on each cover a molten silver rood.

Then darkness came, my stately temple fell
As all shall built 'tween fires of Heaven and Hell.

But one vase from that ruin was regained,
One carven vase unbroken and unstained.

I broke the clasp; the interior was bare
With but a pile of ashes lying there.

TWO OLD WOMEN

Two old women talking by a door,
Two old women by a door,
Talking of many an ancient thing,
Talking, mumbling, whispering,
With heads held close together,
There by the door in spring weather.

What do they talk of, you ask?
'Twere but a senseless task;
Enough for you and me,
Only you and me,
To cling to the memory
Of the old faces in the door,
Two old women in the door,
Chattering like magpies o'er
Things that we do not know,
And shall never know—
And turning we leave them so!

THE SWITCHMAN

On through the deep'ning dusk the street car comes
  Aglow with light,
Then you roll forth from out your eerie roost
  Into the night.

With long gray beard and hungry eyes that look
  Upon the street
You lift the heavy switching bar with slow
  And loitering feet.

The car moves forward as its loud bell clangs,
  And you pull hard
To let it pass while then they leave you there
  Alone on guard.

All through the hours of the dusty day
  And through the night
You stay there like a soldier at his post,
  You and your light.

FIVE HOURS LATER

How fair you look as in my arms you lie
  With loose and oft-kissed hair about your face,
Such wealth of ringlets that no ribbon's tie
  Has ever kept there in their proper place.

Ah, how those half-closed lips have breathed your soul
  When every vein was wrought to fever heat,
When love, triumphant, conquered worlds and all;
  How wonderful it was, how short and sweet!

Child, let me have your hand a moment here,
  I tremble from the throbbing of my heart;
Now let me brush it off, 'tis but a tear—
  Could anything but Death keep us apart?

The room is awfully still to me somehow,
  That clock ticks loud upon the mantel beam,
Far louder than I'd like to have now
  When I am lost within this wonder dream.

An odor as of faded mignonette
  Strikes me—how heavy but how fair your head—
What realms flood me of wild and vain regret
  Since you have been these last five hours dead!

TO MY FATHER

Thou art gone! How vast the void doth seem.
No more within the dark encircling gloom
Shall burn the steady and unceasing flame,
But like a dying star that gleams above
Whose shuddering rays pierce through the darkened sky,
Though dead itself, the light it leaves still burns,
And fading, takes a myriad years to die.

THE POET

I found a flower in the wastes laughing at the sun;
I plucked it from the dreary spot and set it near my heart.
At first my friends admired it,
Spoke of its simple grace—
Yet when it withered not one would have it.
I threw it from me.
There it lay crumpled in the dust.
I left it and tried to banish its beauty from my soul.
I heard that a young poet found it there,
Stooped down, tenderly picked it up
And pressed it to his lips, dust and all.

PIERROT

Pierrot loved her tenderly and spoke
  Between the picking of his mandolin
Of this—she laughed. As though he could invoke
  The dreams of a woman's soul that lie within!

Oft had she laughed at what he said and did,
  His gayeties were known around the earth,
But none, not even she, knew there was hid
  A well of sympathy beneath his mirth.

He stilled the song that fluttered to his lips,
  He knew that he was only used for laughter,
(The Dreamer life's rich nectar never sips,
  Nor hesitates to think of what comes after).

So as she scoffed, poor Pierrot said no word,
  Indeed, what was there for a man to say?
He turned as though her laughter was not heard,
  Swung back his mandolin and went his way.

A NOCTURNE

Around the day's thrilled silences of old
Before the altar of hopes and fears,
With candles that spluttered held close in sockets of
gold.
Hover the dying years.
Through the twisted avenues of night
One echo trembles and then takes flight
Over the rim of a far-flung hill;
The flowers wither in the light
And suddenly the dormant will
Near perishes with delight,
And the hollow hours thrill
With unheard music and the hand
Tingles with some forgotten clasp—
For one delirious moment we understand
And pause and gasp.
Then passionate, insatiate,
We throw ourselves across the disconnected hours
To pluck again the flowers
Which once we cast so recklessly away.
But the end of the day has come—
Come in our absence and chilled the stem—
Only the memory is left of them.

The years, the years, the lovely years
That lurk in the dawn of memory;
With a heart that listens, a heart that hears
Through the misty lanes one melody
That pours into the soul from out
The numberless moments of doubt;
One word, unheard,
That fluttered unuttered
Ere the dusk of love was a bringer of pain,
That waited beyond till the worshipper won
The promise that lurked in her eyes again—
Then shattered the stars and crushed the sun.

And out of the dusk the scent of flowers
Laid on the tomb in dark dismay
That fill the hours
With odors that hover and pass away.

A

A The lovers knelt together and prayed
B Before the altar which they had made,
W Incrusted with silver and delicate jade,
And their eyes said things which the human tongue
H Would have left to die in the heart unsung.
T Around the shadows of that closing day
O Were candles glimmering in the sky,
O And out of the dark the winds would sigh
T And play with the leaves in a friendly way.
A
N A silence settled around them there
A Where the odor of flowers filled the air,
V A distant bird called to its mate
And gaining an answer skimmed to her side
I As though his love could never wait—
Again the silence wandered wide
With now and then a falling leaf
As though the branches shared their grief
And dropped their tears.
The lovers kneeling on the grass
Rise as the morning nears
And watch the night o'er the far hills pass.

Long, long, they knelt in prayer,
Hid in the silence of unnumbered hours,
Heavy with odors of withered flowers
Scenting the air.
Out of the loveliness of the unforgotten past
The twilight of memory nears
The moment when it, too, must go at least
Into the silence of the years.

Adown the darkness where the lovers held their tryst
Came footsteps pounding against the ribs of Earth,
And the lovers smiled to know that in the mist
Others danced to their happiness and shared their mirth—
Suddenly, on the altar a candle flame
Fluttered as though in doubt
And then went out.
They wondered from whence such darkness came,
And rising, stumbled into each other's embrace,
Pressing beating hearts together, hot face to face.
But o'er them had dropped the shadow of despair—
They trembled and fled from each other there
Into the curling lanes of night;
They ran like children in maddened fright.
Out of the lyric silence came anew
A mightier silence that drew
The last breath of wind out of the glade
That lovers had come to unafraid.

THE DAWN OF LIFE

I shall scorn the dearest of human things,
The loveliest of faces, the passionate hours,
The charm of Virtue's whisperings,
And toss aside earth's sweetest flowers.
And why do this, you ask?
Why set the spirit such a task?

Out of the silence of the years of pain
I am a voice that comes again,
That comes again and yet again
With the stored-up strength of many men,
Generations who shall only be
Seeds that flower for my eternity.

The very song I soon shall sing,
The very words choked in my breast,
Shall mean to me one single thing,
One splendid thing, one simple thing—
Within man's heart a new unrest.

Out of a million torpid lives I've come
And as many more shall still be dumb,
But I shall speak for all
One soul supreme
Whose twofold dream
Upon the silent world shall fall,
And while they grope
I shall laugh and hope,
Dreaming for those who understand.
I shall take them by the hand,
Leading them where I go.
Ah! yes, I know
How you treat your pioneers.
But shall I be afraid
And heed such idle fears?
No, the fiercest of all desires must be obeyed.

Then let my deeds be dreams,
And when men battle for the thing that seems
Most hopeless and crowded with despair,
God grant that my poor strength will place me there.

THE DEAD BOOK

"Here," said the monk, with clattering keys in hand,
"Is where the Dead Book rests, of which you've no
Doubt heard. How hard this key turns in the lock.
'Tis years since I came down these dusty halls,
For strangers seldom pass this way. The dark,
Dank air lies foul upon my lungs, and light
But serves to make this inky blackness blacker.
Those shadows form weird arabesques
Upon the wall, and hang like ghosts within
This misty cob-webbed cell. Ugh, 'tis far
Too cold for aching bones like these of mine!
See yonder there, the table and the couch.
Come closer. Here's the book still closed, still dead.
Yea, that dull red is blood, of man's, of men;
These rusty chains are much too weak for use,
The book's a Bible, many centuries old,
Hand-written, painted, bound, as only those
Old monks could do. None knew when first it found
A place in here, but so it did. For years
The students came from lands both far and wide
To glean its knowledge. All went well until
One morning when the Prior came to ask
Some student how he'd fared the night before,
And found him bowed above the leaves, stone dead,
With horror lines hung all about the eyes

Now staring in still space. None thought it more
Than ordinary death; but when one more,
And yet another, and another, too,
Died thus, 'twas deemed uncanny by the monks.
They made a resolution that they'd solve
The puzzle, and one spent the night alone
In study o'er the leaves. He, too, was found
Stark dead upon the morrow, dead and still!
'Twas years before another dared to try
Again. One day a stranger stopped for rest,
And hearing of the Book, desired them
To let him try that night to solve the thing.
At first they sought to change his mind, but when
They found him obdurate, gave in and led
Him through these musty halls up to the room
And left him with their blessings for the night.
Next morn, to their surprise, he walked out well;
This Bible lay wide open, but upon
The left-hand leaf a soft furred Thing lay crushed,
With tendrons curled around the cover clasps.
Then did the stranger tell how in the night
While reading did a long, thin thread, alive,
Come 'round the pages, slow and with no sound.
Then others came, till two blurred eyes peeped o'er

The book's great back. At first he could not stir,
But watched it, fascinated, move. But when
The weird eyes neared his own, he sprung up, dazed,
And closed the heavy volume with a slam.
A colorless liquid traced its way out through
The leaves. An odor as of almonds hung
Upon the air. No danger lay now in
The Book, the stranger swore, and ne'er was seen
Again. And right he was, for none have passed
On fingering it since then."

The monk raised up
The rotten cover in his hand and turned
To me. I was so lost in all I'd heard
I could do naught but stare around the room.
I walked across the musty floor to where
A crucifix stood planted in the wall.
Then sudden did I hear a hellish cry
That to this day strikes terror in my soul.
I swung about. The monk's pale face was torn
With agonizing pain. His livid lips
Were muttering in prayer. He swayed and fell,
One hand clutched tightly in the Book, which crashed
Down by his side! A moving thread curled back
Into the leaves!

I am indebted to the kindness of the Editors of Greenwich Village Magazine, The Parisienne, American Art News, The Philadelphia Press, The Milford (Mass.) Daily Journal, The Boston Post, The Buffalo Evening Times, The Catonsville (Md.) Argus, The Elizabeth City (N. C.) Advance, Eastern State Journal of New York, The DeLand Daily News of Florida, and American Israelite of Cincinnati, Ohio, etc., for their printing of many of my poems for the first time, a few of which are in this volume.

Date Due

Due	Returned	Due	Returned

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA
3 1262 04998 3892
811.5
H572w
UTO A HLL